The Impact of New Technologies on the Future of Marketing: the Challenges of Adopting Artificial Intelligence-Generated Influencers in Marketing Strategies. Is the Romanian Market Ready for this Emerging Trend?

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of new technologies on the marketing field and focuses on the challenges of adopting artificial intelligence (AI)-generated influencers in marketing strategies. More exactly, it aims to explore, through the eyes of marketing professionals, the readiness of the Romanian market when it comes to this emerging trend and its ability to leverage the advantages offered by AI influencers in promoting products and services. An in-depth review of literature and relevant industry data reveals the potential benefits and challenges associated with the use of AI influencers in marketing strategies. In addition, the results of the research provide a key insight of the current use of AI influencers in marketing strategies in the Romanian market. These findings can be beneficial for companies and marketing professionals to make informed decisions with respect to integrating AI influencers into their marketing strategies.

Key words: AI influencers, new technologies, marketing strategy, social media, consumer behaviour
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1. Introduction

New technologies have influenced the way in which companies interact with consumers, leading them to adopt innovative strategies to promote their products and services in an increasingly competitive environment. An interesting element is represented by the use of artificial intelligence (AI) generated influencers in marketing strategies.

This paper focuses on the impact of new technologies on the future of marketing and the challenges of adopting AI influencers in marketing strategies. More exactly, this study aims to investigate whether the Romanian market is ready to cope with this emerging trend and to leverage the benefits offered by AI influencers when it comes to brands' promotion campaigns.

Artificial intelligence has had a significant impact in the marketing sphere, opening up new possibilities and challenges. The concept of AI influencers refers to the use of artificial intelligence algorithms to create virtual personas, which subsequently become ambassadors for brands and products.These AI influencers are programmed to interact with the public through social media platforms, promoting thus products and taking part in marketing campaigns. While this approach may seem futuristic and still unthinkable this movement has already penetrated the marketing environment. Nevertheless, the involvement of AI influencers raises questions and challenges with respect to the ethical implications and how this new technology element is perceived by consumers.

The ultimate goal of this study is to take an in-depth look at the impact of AI influencers on the future of marketing and to examine the challenges and opportunities of adopting them in marketing strategies. Also, this study aims to assess how AI influencers can increase brand visibility, by creating personalised content and improving customer engagement. It will also measure the degree of familiarity and acceptance of AI personas by the Romanian public and identify potential cultural, ethical and legal limitations that could affect the adoption of this emerging trend in our market.

In order to achieve this objective, a mixed research approach will be used. In other words, this paper encompasses both literature analysis and relevant industry data, meaning that previous research on the impact of new technologies in marketing will be investigated. Finally, some opinions of field experts will be presented as to provide a base for making informed decisions when it comes to this emerging trend.

2. Literature review

With the infiltration of the new technologies, the manner in which individuals relate to the environment has changed considerably. This is even more visible in consumers' behaviour when faced with the decision-making process. However, all these technological advancements are perceived to provide a better understanding with respects to the needs of individuals and therefore to their optimal satisfaction (Allsteadt, 2017).

Social media revolution has altered the way in which traditional communication, as well as marketing communication, is conducted, subsequently leading to new forms of interactions for the procurement of goods and services. It has been observed that the nowadays tendency of individuals is to spend more and more time on social media platforms sharing and learning information about products, brands and services.

With this new marketing communication in place, new challenges and opportunities do not cease to appear. Social media interaction became the driver of the purchase decision and the trigger of awareness for both brands and products (Appel et al., 2020). With fewer costs but a guaranteed great value, the level of engagement in a company's social media platforms generates relevant insights for the organization in question when it comes to improving sales, increasing exposure, growing partnerships, generating lead and last but not least, increasing traffic. Hence, nowadays, as to facilitate the understanding of consumers' behaviour the best weapon is represented by new technologies (e.g. Artificial Intelligence).

All these technological transformations can come with both advantages and disadvantages in terms of consumer reactions. In other words, they can either opt to be promoters of these innovative technologies and at the same time, be eager to benefit from the experience produced by them or be reluctant as to protect their personal identity. Regardless of which side they belong to, consumers are generally perceived as followers of the solutions provided by new technologies, especially if the compliance with the ethical framework is ensured (Fang & Li, 2014).

In the light of this, the research focuses on both the manner in which the presence of non- humans is able to replace the presence of humans in the online environment and its subsequent impact on consumers (general well-being levels, ethics). Virtual influencers or artificial intelligence influencers are computer-generated influencers with a large number of followers on social media (Moustakas et al., 2020). The majority of virtual influencers are not fully controlled by artificial intelligence being partly supervised by humans (Thomas & Fowler, 2020).

Brands want to use virtual influencers in their marketing strategies to profit from their large followers' data base (Kádeková & Holiencinova, 2018). Even though virtual influencers do not exist in 'real' life, Robinson (2020) they are perceived as authentic and 'real' as social media influencers, given that their actions and engagement rates affect people's buying behaviour and brand preferences. It does not come as a surprise that virtual influencers are also capable of influencing followers and consumers, as well as positively affecting brand benefits (Thomas & Fowler, 2020). In addition, it was discovered that virtual influencers have three times more engagement than social media influencers (Ong, 2020).

Smith and Johnson (2021) paper analysed the impact of artificial intelligence-generated influencers on customer experience and marketing strategies. The authors explored the manner in which AI influencers can personalize the customer experience, creating thus, relevant and engaging content.

The research emphasized how this aspect, of "personalised content", can help improve customer engagement and subsequently, increase brand loyalty.

Garcia et all (2022) paper focused mainly on the ethical practices in AI influencer marketing. The authors provided the basis of an ethical framework for marketing practitioners, addressing issues such as transparency, data privacy and lastly, consumer impact. The results emphasised the importance of both following ethical principles in the adoption of AI influencers and ensuring responsible practice in this area.

Johnson & Thompson's (2023) paper explores the manner in which AI-generated influencers impact consumer behavior. By analysing the impact of AI influencers on consumer preferences and purchase decisions, the authors highlighted the power of influence exercised by the non-human influencers. In addition, their research proved that the integration of AI influencers into marketing strategies maximises results.

Lee and Park's (2022) paper focuses on consumer trust in AI influencers. The authors investigated how the use of AI influencers can affect consumer trust and perception towards brands and products. Through an empirical study, they showed that transparency, authenticity and consistency of AI influencers' messages are key factors in building trust and relationship with consumers.

Li and Chen's (2023) research examines the ethical implications of using AI influencers in marketing. It provides insight into the potential risks and obligations of companies adopting AI influencers in their marketing strategy and advises field professionals to ensure that customer rights are fully taken into consideration.

3. Research methodology

This study was based on qualitative research that helped in providing a general framework of the investigated concept. The qualitative research consisted of 10 (ten) questions addressed to 7 (seven) professionals in the field through the means of a zoom interview. The interview in question lasted for about 30 minutes and the respondents were asked to justify all their answers as explicitly as possible. In addition, the individuals who took part in the interview were field professionals who hold key positions and possess relevant roles in the development and implementation of marketing strategies in a specific organisation within the Romanian market. The key results of the research are provided in the next section as to provide a clearer understanding of the researched subject. The outcomes should be considered as a base for the potential provided by the adoption of AI influencers' in a brand's marketing strategy within the Romanian market.

4. Findings

Out of the 7 field experts 4 of them were very familiar with the AI-generated influencers, while 3 were not, when responding to the first question of the interview *"Please indicate how familiar are you with non-human influencers/ AI-generated influencers?"*.

The following key question *"To what extent do you think AI influencers might exercise a positive impact on the customer experience in marketing?"* 5 respondents agreed that non-human influencers might exercises a very high impact on consumers, whereas the remaining 2 respondents consider that AI influencers might have an impact but not a crucial one justifying their answer as follows: "this AI tool is still new for the Romanian market and therefore, we cannot guarantee for its potential success".

When it came to the importance of transparency when employing AI influencers (*"How important do you think transparency is for a brand when adopting a non-human influencer as an ambassador?"*), marketing experts agreed (7 out of 7) that it is very important given that it impacts consumers' trust towards that particular brand.

Further on, in terms of ethical implications (*"In your opinion, what are the main ethical challenges related to the use of AI-generated influencers in marketing?"*) respondents admitted the high sensitivity of this topic (7 out of 7) emphasizing the importance of taking into account consumers' rights when implementing this new technology in a brand's marketing strategy.

Lastly, 1 out of 7 respondents admitted using AI influencers in their current marketing strategy registering positive outcomes among consumers and increased conversion rates ("Would you be willing to use AI influencers in your marketing strategy?" / "Do you think AI influencers can help increase conversions in marketing?"). Part of the remaining 6 being either skeptical or not having had the chance to adopt this new technology withing their marketing strategy.

The limitation of this research should be taken into account. Given the limited number of respondents (7), in order to ensure the accuracy of the study the interview should be further extended to more marketing experts.

5. Conclusion

The review of relevant literature and the undertaken research highlighted the positive impact exercised by AI influencers on both customer experience and marketing strategies, considering as well the various ethical challenges implied. In addition, the present research covers issues such as personalisation of the experience, influence on consumer behaviour and legal implications, providing thus a solid research framework for deepening the understanding of this emerging field and guiding ethical and effective marketing practices.

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